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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and discusses the informational, procedural, situational, and psychological barriers that hinder the academic progress of adult students and the methods by which institutions of higher education can remove these barriers. Following a review of the increase of adult students on campuses and their goals, attitudes, and demographics, a section on informational barriers notes the frequency with which students may encounter these barriers throughout the college experience and suggests that institutions can be more targeted and aggressive in the ways they get information out to these students. A section on procedural barriers describes these types of obstacles as those created by the institutional structure and thus designed to meet the needs of the traditional student. This section discusses admissions, course scheduling, registration, and faculty relations. Next, situational barriers are described as life circumstance barriers unique to each student such as financial needs, housing problems, and lack of family support. Discussed here also are day care needs, living space, financial support, and social isolation. A final section on psychological barriers concerns issues from low self-esteem to identity crises as they relate to the older student in particular. Also described are ways that colleges can respond. Included are 14 references. (JB)

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From Recruitment to Matriculation: Meeting the Needs of Adult Students

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From Recruitment to Matriculation:
Meeting the Needs of Adult Students

The adult student population is the fastest growing segment on college campuses. The adult students who enter our colleges and universities bring unique characteristics to the campus which not only create problems for the students but for the institution as well. This paper identifies four barriers adult students encounter as they enter institutions of higher education. These barriers are classified as procedural, psychological, informational, and situational. Actions which can be taken by institutions to remove these barriers are described.

From Recruitment to Matriculation:
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There is a "new student" in higher education. This new student is not the traditional eighteen year old who moves into the college dorm. The new student is older, has family commitments, and lives away from campus. For the new student, the social life of campus is secondary to getting through college quickly and painlessly. The new student is called many things - non-traditional, reentry, adult learner. Yet, regardless of the name by which these students are called, they are characterized as older than traditional students, financially independent, and lacking recent experience in the classroom and an understanding of college routines.

Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) stated that adult students are the fastest growing segment of the college population. Between 1972 and 1982, the percentage of adults (age 25-34) attending college increased 69.8% (King, 1985). For those adults over the age of 34, the percent of increase was an astounding 77.4%. Hodgkinson (1985) noted that of the twelve million college students in the United States, only about two million are full-time, living on campus, and aged 18-22. Fall, 1987, 62.7% of all part-time students and 44.4% of all students enrolled in colleges and universities were age twenty-five and over (The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 1991). This seems to verify Mendelsohn's (1986) prediction that by the year 2000 more

students on college campuses will be over than under twenty-five years old. It is obvious that non-traditional students are quickly becoming the majority rather than the minority on our campuses.

The adult students who enter our colleges and universities bring unique characteristics to the campus which not only create problems for the students but also for the institution. Almost all adult students are returning to college because of some transitional state in their personal or career life. Greenfeig and Goldberg (1984) found that the classification of adult students includes those who (1) are newly separated or divorced, (2) want or need a mid-life career change, (3) wish to reenter the job market, and (4) have been laid off or have chosen to leave their jobs and return to college in order to upgrade skills and obtain a higher level job. Therefore, while these individuals try to establish themselves as students, they are creating new identities in all areas of their lives. As these students try to deal with the emotional issues evolving from these life changes, they also must deal with the emotional challenges of being a first-time student.

Adult students are often facing tremendous financial pressures because of a change in marital status, a recent loss of a job, or just the added expense of attending college. According to Vandell (1992) the financial demands of college, particularly for single women with children, can make it very difficult for adult students to complete a college or university

degree. Female students who are independent, part-time, and older have school related costs that are approximately fifteen percent higher than those of similar male students, and the proportion of their need met by financial aid is lower than it is for nontraditional men students. This study found that for separated students, only 55% of women's costs and 75% of men's cost are met by their aid awards.

While it is common for all students to experience stress when they enter college, the amount of stress experienced by non-traditional students is tremendous. In addition to being a college student, adult students are spouses, parents, employees, and children to parents who make their own set of demands. Each of these roles provides a unique set of responsibilities pulling the student away from the time needed for academic pursuits. Because of their lack of academic experience, adult students do not have the academic network that exists for their younger counterparts. Adult students often hesitate to speak up in class or seek the instructor outside class. The majority, being commuter students, leave campus as soon as classes end and therefore, never establish a network of classmates to call upon when they must miss class or fail to understand instructions. For adult students, everything from the vocabulary to the administrative structure of the academic environment is new and foreign.

Hardin (1988) found that the adult learner is often in need of remedial or developmental help. Many adult students need such

assistance because they left high school without acquiring the skills needed to succeed in college. These students may have poor self-concepts and see themselves as less capable than their younger classmates. Other adults may have had a college-prep background when they were in high school, yet not used these academic skills in many years. Therefore, these students need to brush up on skills that have been dormant for a number of years. Without the help provided by such remedial and developmental programs, adult students may become discouraged and decide they were wise to avoid the college environment for such a long time.

However, the picture for non-traditional students is not completely bleak. Adult students bring experiences to the classroom that add to the wealth of information available to all students. These students are often described by their instructors as more eager, motivated, and committed than their traditional age counterparts. Haponski and McCabe (1985) found that there is less absenteeism among adult students. Adult students have a greater appreciation of good teaching. Adult students are also extremely loyal. Once enrolled at a college, most adult students say they plan to obtain a degree there.

If institutions are prepared to recognize the challenges and needs of our adults students, students will not only meet their goals, but make valuable contributions to the campus as well. If we bring these students to campus, we must make a commitment to meet their needs and eliminate the barriers that exist for them. Pinkston (1987) identified four types of barriers which

adult college students face. These barriers were classified as procedural, environmental, psychological, and financial. Pinkston's barriers have been modified to include informational barriers and environmental, financial, and personal issues have been expanded into a category classified as situational barriers. Therefore, this paper will address informational, procedural, situational, and psychological barriers that hinder the academic progress of adult students and the methods by which institutions can remove these four barriers.

Informational Barriers

As adult students contemplate attending college, they often encounter the first of many barriers in reaching their goals. Often, without realizing it, an institution puts up informational barriers that block students' progress. These barriers may occur any time during their college career, from the moment that students consider attending college to the placement process at graduation.

Many students simply do not know where to find information about the institutions they want to attend. Therefore, it is up to the institution interested in attracting adult students to bring the information to potential students. This can be done in any of the following ways:

1. The institution may send promotional information about the college to all residents within the campus community. Roane State Community College in Rockwood, Tennessee sends a class schedule to all adults in the

surrounding rural communities. Other schools provide promotional brochures that feature adult students.

2. Several colleges disseminate information through booths at malls and shopping centers. Leach (1984) noted that over 2000 contacts were made with potential students at such an informational booth. Of these, 1,336 requested additional information and 110 registered for the next semester.

3. A popular way to inform students is to provide an evening for adult students during which they come to campus and investigate the various programs available to them. At these meetings, potential students are introduced to campus services and key personnel such as counselors, peer leaders, admissions personnel, and financial aid advisers. Other topics which should be covered during these evening programs include possibilities for acquiring credit for life experiences and the availability of job placement programs.

The need for information provided in a way that is appropriate to the potential adult student continues as the student prepares to register for the first term. At this point, colleges should provide a special orientation for the adult student that is staffed by aware professionals and peers sensitive to the unique problems of these students. During this orientation a variety of subjects should be addressed such as advisement, registration, and services for adult students.

Careful advisement during orientation is essential. Advisors should be selected on the basis of knowledge about and interest in the adult learner. They must help students find the right mix and number of courses at the appropriate level. Scheduling is important since many students are juggling work, school, and family.

Another important task during the advising process is a careful assessment of the student's educational goals. Because many adult students want to complete their academic requirements as quickly as possible, they may make choices which will prevent them from reaching these goals. It is the responsibility of the advisor to see that during the initial meeting with adult students that they are made aware of the relationship between the choices they make in college and the acquisition of their goals.

As adult students begin their courses, they often find they are in need of information on study hints and tips for balancing homework, school, and home. In addition, the adult learner often needs information about time management, stress reduction, financial aid, career exploration, and mental health services. Workshops, seminars, and brown bag lunch discussions are popular ways to disseminate information.

An effective way of providing necessary information to returning adult students is a directory of resources of both on and off campus organizations. In addition to essential services provided by the institution, such directories should provide information about community services including telephone numbers

for church organizations, legal assistance, crisis call lines, and safe houses for abused women.

Procedural Barriers

Procedural barriers are any barriers created by the institutional structure. Since colleges have designed their procedures and policies to meet the needs of traditional students, college officials may not understand that these procedures not only make enrollment by adult students difficult, but impossible. Procedural barriers start at the moment students express initial interest in attending college.

The admissions issues for adult students are often quite different from those of traditional students. Therefore, specially trained admissions counselors should assist returning students with such concerns as transfer credit evaluation, scheduling problems, credit by examination, credit for life experiences, and academic alternatives. These admissions counselors must be aware of special admissions policies which apply to adult students. Many adult students have previous academic records that will haunt them as they return to college. Admissions counselors must know about campus programs to help students erase bad records and start fresh. Admissions counselors trained to answer these initial questions, set the stage for a successful academic experience.

The schedule of courses presents another barrier for many adult students. According to Thompson (1985) many colleges design their schedules to fit the needs and interest of

traditional age students or faculty. The scheduling of classes is crucial if institutions want to attract and retain adult students. While traditional residential students generally register for late morning and early afternoon courses, nontraditional, part-time students have different needs requiring different scheduling arrangements. When adult students find that no courses are offered during the limited time they can arrange work and family schedules, they receive a message from the institution. That message is that they are not wanted. Unfortunately, many institutions have not perceived scheduling as a marketing tool.

Registration is also a roadblock for the adult student. Too few institutions extend the hours of registration to accommodate students who must balance jobs and family. When adult students encounter long lines and forms that ask for a parent's signature, they are sent a clear message that the institution is not prepared to cope with their needs.

Adult students may find other procedural barriers when they interact with faculty. Faculty may ignore the adult student or call attention to them in an insensitive manner. For example, the instructor may call on an adult student to get the "older" point of view. There should be a balance. Faculty should be aware of the stages of adult development. Increased sophistication in this area will help professionals design learning systems and environments responsive to adult learners.

Situational Barriers

Adult students face situational barriers due to their life circumstances. Financial needs, housing problems, and lack of family support fall in this category. These barriers are more difficult for the institution to remove because they are unique to the individual. However, awareness of the needs and characteristics of the adult learner allows institutions to address some of these barriers and smooth the way for the students.

The lack of available day care is often a situational barrier for the adult student. However, once day care has been established, most institutions find day care not only helpful to students, staff, and faculty, but also cost effective. In many instances students serve in the day care center in lieu of payment. It is important to have a "drop in" program as well as regular services in order to accommodate as many students as possible. It is essential that hours for day care include late afternoon and evening times to meet the needs of adult students who are taking evening classes or who need to work in the library or labs.

Adult students should be made aware of options for off or on campus housing. Multi-generational living arrangements can lead to valuable learning experiences. However, many adult students prefer more private living arrangements than the dorm. Some larger schools provide separate housing in apartments or reserve specific floors or wings for adult students.

Lack of financial support may prevent an adult student from entering the university. Financial aid should have a centralized location and possibly have a representative visit returning adult students in a lounge set aside for their use. A contact person could be specified to deal with the adult students.

Traditional financial aid packages may not meet the needs of the adult student. As stated earlier, the financial needs of adult students differ from their traditional counterparts because of the added cost of housing and child care. Therefore, institutions should help students find ways to deal with the high cost of attending college. Some schools have a book loan fund and charge a small handling fee for its use. Other universities have established student co-ops through which typing or laundry services can be exchanged for auto or home repairs.

Lack of family support can be a situational roadblock for the adult student. Often family members do not understand the effort it takes to be a student. Family members may be inconvenienced because a parent or spouse takes college courses. They may resent being asked to take on more work around the home. For many family members, the campus environment is confusing and new and they fear that the experience will change their loved one. Because of these fears, family members often put impossible demands upon the students hoping the student will decide to forgo the academic experience. This barrier may be especially difficult for adult women who return to school. Huston-Hoburg and Strange (1986) state that school may represent a direct

challenge to traditional role distinctions and, therefore, may require greater adjustments to the established patterns of family life. Student affairs professionals should be conscious of these concerns and plan programs to address these issues. To remove this barrier, family members should be incorporated into the academic process through orientation sessions and social activities. When the entire family is made to feel that the campus is responsive to their needs, the support for the family member who is a student increases.

Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers concern a wide variety of issues from low self-esteem to identity crisis. Institutions can address these issues and help break down the barrier.

Many adult students suffer from poor self-esteems. Their previous failures haunt them. They fear that their brains are rusty since there has been a long period of time since their previous academic experience. Therefore, adult students need success experiences early. They must have quick feedback on their assignments to reassure them that they are on the right track. Peer tutoring can be important at this stage to help break the skills and anxiety barriers.

Not only may their self-esteems suffer but they also may go through an identity crisis after returning to college. Often adult students have neglected their own goals while helping others attain theirs, so they may have to redefine themselves. Peer counseling could be the answer for students in this

situation. Trained, supervised adult students could counsel and act as role models for the returning student.

Adult students often feel isolated. Therefore, a support group can be especially helpful in ending the isolation felt by these students. The group should have its own meeting place, officers, and advisor. These groups are difficult to maintain but can be very useful in solving the problem of isolation and adjustment to college. It helps to share similar concerns and problems.

Personal counseling can help students remove many psychological barriers that prevent success in college. Self esteem difficulties, poor self confidence, and adjustment problems can be addressed in counseling. Many university counseling centers have wellness programs that focus on academic, psychological, and physical wellness.

The recruiting and retaining of adult students may make or break institutions of higher education. Yet, the adult student is often the most ignored student on our campuses. Knowles (1984) states, "it is perhaps a sad commentary that, of all our social institutions, colleges and universities have been among the slowest to respond to adult learners" (p. 284). It is time that institutions of higher education face shrinking enrollments of traditional full-time students, examine the potential of returning students, move forward to remove the barriers that exist, and open the doors to adult learners.

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